

# Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Coping: U.S. Students in Taiwanese Higher Education

Wen-Ling Lou

Lingnan Normal Universty, Zhanjiang, China

The aim of this study was to investigate the adjustment problems of students from the United States enrolled in universities in the East, specifically in Taiwan, their problems related to cultural adaptation, and the process of adjustment to student life in Taiwan. Under investigation were cultural adjustment and coping skills as these students transitioned from West to East. Qualitative data were collected from interviews with participants and faculty members as well as participant observations. Results indicated that U.S. students found their own ways to acclimate to their new academic setting as well as to social relations, cross-cultural issues, and the linguistic environment in Taiwan to achieve effective adaptation. They made changes in themselves to cope with all situations they encountered. This study provides suggestions for international students abroad in Taiwan, for the Taiwanese government, and for universities or colleges in terms of what they should offer to current and future international students.

*Keywords:* adjustment, cultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, coping, U.S. students

## Introduction

Globalization is a popular phenomenon everywhere today. Countries all over the world have expanded from the domestic to the international sphere, not only in business but also in education. People have engaged in international activities and studies, resulting in cross-cultural living (Ying, 2005). The Taiwanese government has taken note of this all-important international shift and has laid out a sweeping path toward its own internationalization. President Ma (2011) has declared that to compete with other countries and enhance Taiwan's role on the world stage, internationalized campuses and international education are crucial, because they promote national competitiveness and further national development.

Thus, the Taiwanese government grants substantial amounts of money to support its universities and to encourage all of them to offer scholarships for international students living in Taiwan and to facilitate their understanding of the host culture and social systems as well. The number of international students in Taiwan has increased significantly because of "the higher incentives of many universities in Taiwan to open up their doors and lower the thresholds for these incoming international students" (Chang, 2011, p. 6). For example, in the 2022 academic year, a total of 359 Honduran students enrolled at Taiwanese universities, among whom 104 received grants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chen, 2023).

---

**Acknowledgments:** The author deeply appreciates Iu-Ling Chang, Ho-Jou Lu, and Yu-Chi Tseng for their contribution to part of the literature collection, data collection, transcription as well as their academic assistance.

Wen-Ling Lou, Ph.D., associate professor, School of Foreign Studies, Lingnan Normal Universty, Zhanjiang, China.

Universities in the United States have sent countless students abroad. For example, the University of Denver set up a scholarship program to encourage 60% of its students to study abroad (Young, 2009), so that as many students as possible have the opportunity for a cross-cultural experience. Most Western students who study in Taiwan come from the United States and attend various Taiwanese universities.

In past years when Asian students studied overseas, the United States was first choice of students. Those Asian students encountered difficulties in both academic and living situations. For example, in U.S. classrooms Asian students felt especially pressured and culturally alien, causing considerable stress, particularly when they were assigned oral presentations in class, were required to participate in group activities, or simply wanted to ask a question (Huntley, 1993). U.S. culture is mostly individualistic, but Taiwanese culture is more collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, when Taiwanese students came to the United States, they experienced difficulties making friends with U.S. students on campus because of differences in language, values, beliefs, religion, and lifestyles.

The cross-cultural adjustment process for sojourners, regardless of the purpose of their stay or the status of their home country affiliations, is demanding. The most commonly mentioned adjustment problems of student sojourners have included experiencing homesickness; adjusting to a new educational system, social customs, and norms; and facing language difficulties, financial problems, and—for some students—racial discrimination (Church, 1982). Many studies have treated Asian students studying overseas (Mori, 2000) with few studies on student sojourners from Western countries. The current study focused on students from the United States studying in Taiwan, what difficulties they faced in cultural adjustment and adaptation, and how they coped with these cultural difficulties in various situations. The research questions as follow:

1. What difficulties or barriers influence U.S. students' learning at Taiwanese universities?
2. How do U.S. students adjust to their intercultural life in Taiwan and cope with their difficulties?
3. What adjustments do U.S. students make and what coping skills do they use to alleviate problems when studying in Taiwan? In what ways do they seek help?

## **Literature Review**

Many researchers have studied adjustment among international students, particularly Asian students, because in the last decade thousands of them have traveled to the United States to study at universities in the United States. Those who study in another country are exposed to specific problems (Church, 1982); moreover, an international student's academic performance can be affected by his or her psychological adjustment, sociocultural adjustment, and assimilation into a new cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Westwood & Barker, 1990, as cited in Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Thus, this study is warranted. The literature review below covers cultural adjustment and the related cultural adaptation, coping, and cross-cultural counseling.

### **Cultural Adjustment**

Adjustment involves five determinants of culture: geographic surroundings, climate, resources, human achievements in the cultural environment, and cultural change (DiCaprio, 1980). Also of importance is the impact of human achievements on the cultural environment and the process of understanding and incorporating behaviors, values, and beliefs of the host culture from the perspective of the individual's own culture of origin (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). Cultural adjustment continually interacts with people in the new cultural environment, and then people try to adjust and deal with these interactions in own way (Church, 1982). Knowing

about social and cultural forces that are ever-present features of adjustment and coping is essential. When people experience stress and coping in cultural adjustment, they reveal a psychological adjustment as measured by assessing global mood disturbance or by a more specific assessment of depression affected by personality factors, life changes, and social support. This may impact their adjustment to a new environment and change their thinking, feeling, behavior, and psychology.

A synthesis interpretation of cultural adjustment indicates two types: psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment. The former is interwoven with the stress and coping process, the latter predicated on cultural learning (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Among the commonly mentioned problems of foreign students, for instance, the most important is language if studying in the host language as well as adjustment to a new educational system, food, climate, social customs and norms, not to mention personal problems.

### **Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

Related to cultural adjustment, the concept of cultural adaptation also has various meanings, involving culture as the environment in which people live (Hall, 1973). Every aspect of people's lives is governed by culture. Thus, human beings change when the culture changes; furthermore, people's existence is dependent on culture, including the way they express themselves; the way they reveal their ideas, their thinking, their behaviors; and the way they solve problems. Cross-cultural adaptation is an adjustment process in which individuals intend to understand and integrate a new culture into their original cultural context (Constantine et al., 2004). When individuals face new cultural standards, they understand their own cultural orientations; the larger the scope of the openness, the higher the likelihood of their thinking being changed by external information.

Cross-cultural adaptation includes the social and psychological combination of learners and the target language when foreign students in a new environment could be influenced by a range of factors, including their emotions, expressions, thinking, behaviors, problem-solving, personal performance, and coping (Yeh, 1999). In addition, cross-cultural adaptation refers to the reconsideration of adjustment based on the distinction of two fundamental types of adjustment to better match the new culture: behavioral and ideological criteria. During the course of cross-cultural adaptation, individuals experience various feelings as well as learning and psychological changes (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

The stress-adaptation growth dynamics of cross-cultural experiences bring about cultural strangers' gradual transformation toward increased functional fitness in the host milieu (Kim, 1988). Effective intrapersonal (e.g., cognitive, affective, and behavioral) and social (e.g., interpersonal and mass) communication activities are theorized as being at the heart of successful adaptation along with individual background characteristics and host environmental conditions.

### **Coping**

Coping and adjustment are psychological responses in the international sojourner to the new host environment wherein they struggle to meet the demands of an unfamiliar culture and confront strangers as well as new tasks and situations (Kim, 1988; Sykes & Eden, 1987). Coping is defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

"Human beings have always had to cope with stress, but it seems that they are now coping with more stress than ever" (Calhoun & Acocella, 1990, p. 12). Those who study in different countries must not only adjust to

cultural diversity but also know how to cope in a different culture. The concept of coping with problems is related to adaptation, and individuals develop various types of coping (Sümer, 2009). An examination of the relationship between coping styles and the psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation of international students in the United States has shown that “the stress and coping model suggests that under these circumstances, individuals consider the meaning of their experiences; they evaluate and appraise them as either a source of difficulty or as a source of opportunity” (Sümer, 2009, pp. 31-32). Overall, international students studying in unfamiliar countries must determine ways of coping.

The two functions of coping include problem solving, also called “problem-focused coping”, which entails changing the environment or situation or oneself (Lazarus, 1981; 1993). The second function of coping is to self-regulate emotional distress, also called “emotion focused coping”, which means to manage the stress-related emotions that may destroy or damage morale or social functioning.

An exclusive focus on personality types is less realistic than examining coping within the framework of the relationship between people and their environment. Some scholars have attempted to put culture back into cross-cultural transition research by comparing similar sojourning groups in varying cultural contexts (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). The findings support the distinction of psychological and sociocultural dimensions of adjustment and suggest that the former may be appropriately interpreted within a stress and coping framework.

The theory of psychological adjustment and coping was based on several studies showing foreign students with adjustment problems in different cultures and dealing with issues, such as feelings of homesickness, loneliness, depression, or others, for example, language, social customs and norms, and a new educational system (Church, 1982). Furthermore, nationality is an important variable in studies of foreign students’ adjustment. Scholars examining differences in the adjustment of sojourners from other nations often make reference to “cultural distance”, with most investigators arguing that adjustment will be more difficult for visitors or foreign students coming from home cultures that significantly differ from the host culture. This clearly connects with the current study focusing on U.S. students from a Western culture who come to an Eastern culture.

### **Cross-Cultural Counseling**

An important figure in the process of cultural adjustment is the cross-cultural counselor, who must have certain qualities, including cultural relativism and empathy, a knowledge of the common adjustment-related experiences encountered by sojourners, and a sound knowledge and awareness of one’s own culture (Church, 1982). Most importantly, a cross-cultural counselor must be required to undergo his or her own culture shock and subsequent self-analysis, and thus be able to transmit to others strategies for adjustment to new cultural environments.

Cross-cultural counseling for sojourner adjustment is aimed at the reticence of foreign students from many cultures to use psychological services, their tendency to experience psychological difficulties in physical terms, and their lesser psychological sophistication in relating emotional difficulties to physical complaints (Church, 1982). These tendencies might reflect in part the fewer psychological resources taken advantage of in their home societies but a greater dependence on extended family, peers, and other social networks for emotional support and problem solving. Counseling may be useful for international students to gain support and a measure of adjustment and may help these sojourners define their own balance of cultural identifications in resolving conflict. This counseling approach to cultural adjustment is relevant to this study the focus of which was U.S. student sojourners living in Taiwan, a Far Eastern culture that is substantially different from Western cultures and whether and how they adjust and cope in a cross-cultural context.

## Method

Data for this study were gathered through qualitative research.

### Participants

Six students from the United States participated in this study. They attended two different universities in southern Taiwan. To better certify the author's research, she set standards for the participants living in Taiwan for at least six months without the intention to immigrate. Six months were used as a cut-off criterion to control for the "honeymoon phase" or state of initial excitement and euphoria that is common in sojourners (Church, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Participants were limited to students from the United States who had traveled to Taiwan for degrees or to learn Chinese at the Chinese Language Center. Exchange students were excluded. Each participant studying at the host university was in attendance for at least six months. The participants' background, including name, age, gender, home state, and major in Taiwan and at home, appears in Table 1. Data were collected primarily from interviews and participant observations. A consent form was signed by each participant.

Table 1

#### *Participants*

Name items	Marie	Nancy	Kevin	Jackson	Bryan	Ben
Age	19	18	25	25	18	17
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Home state	Tennessee	Illinois	California	California	North Carolina	Maryland
Major (in TW)	Chinese	Chinese	International-Business	International Business	Chinese	Chinese
Major (in USA)	N/A	Engineering	Marketing	Business Accounting	N/A	High School

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms.

### Data Collection

Primary data sources included interviews with the participants and faculty members as well as participant observations. All interviews were tape-recorded. As all the participants were from the United States, the interviews were conducted bilingually and translated from Chinese into English by the author.

Interviews with the participants alone could not produce all the data necessary for this study. Judging whether the participants' responses to the author's questions corresponded to their answers and actions was also crucial. In other words, the author needed to determine whether their answers and actions were consistent with each other; therefore, she interviewed faculty members who had taught the participants in their major departments and observed each of them, allowing for triangulation of the data collected. Her record of observations consisted of an unbiased and accurate description of what the author observed.

### Procedures

The participants and the faculty in this study were personally contacted during their free time. All are in-depth interviews with the participants and faculty members varied from 35 to 40 minutes. An informed consent form was signed by participants and faculty members, allowing what they said to be made public. All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and critically analyzed with special attention to relationships among the issues in order to find the research results.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is an interactive process in which the researcher works inductively from specific and purposeful points in the data (Pitts, 2009). Working on the data collected, the author selected, tagged, and grouped units of data together that informed her research purpose and questions (Baptiste, 2001). She used line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts, analyzing those notes she had highlighted, rereading multiple times (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). She checked for anything that was missed and then interpreted the transcripts for findings. After checking the data, the author analyzed them and tried to determine what was meaningful to this study. She also looked for any unexpected results and discovered new findings.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative research reliability and validity are the important standards (Cheng, 2002). “Reliability, validity and triangulation, if they are relevant research concepts, particularly from a qualitative point of view, have to be redefined in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 597). Reliability involves obtaining consistent scores. One person who takes the same examination at different times or completes two examinations at the same time attains stable scores (Frankel & Wallen, 2003). Therefore, in analyzing the data in this study, the author proceeded as correctly and honestly as possible.

To enhance the reliability and validity in this study, the author sent the transcripts to the participants and faculty and asked them to make a careful check, so as to assure the accuracy of interviewees’ answers.

Triangulation is fundamental in qualitative research. “When triangulation made its way into qualitative research, it carried its old meaning—verification of the facts—but picked up another” (Bogdan & Biklen 2007, p. 115). Triangulation involves checking data what the researcher hears and sees by comparing one’s sources of information (Frankel & Wallen, 2003). Based on the theories of triangulation from experts, triangulation is quite an important check in qualitative research, and the author believes that what she has done has accurately certified each participant’s assessment in her study.

## **Results**

The results showed that all participants indicated they had learned and changed perspectives and viewpoints to some degree while studying in Taiwan and experienced cross-cultural interactions with Taiwanese people as well as in problem solving. In terms of academic problems, personal adjustment problems, and sociocultural problems, the results were expected by the author. Through data collection, transcription, and coding, she developed four categories to illustrate her findings: (a) difficulties or problems influencing U.S. students’ learning; (b) differences in school life in Taiwan; (c) adjustment; and (d) approach to adjustment and coping.

### **Difficulties or Problems Influencing U.S. Students’ Learning**

The participants felt a lack of communication skills in Chinese affected their ability to understand and talk. They all mentioned that these problems occurred primarily upon arrival to Taiwan, but most felt better after a few months. Thus, students from the United States have the same problems with language difficulties that international students in a variety of host countries have (Church, 1982). Therefore, the author believes that language may create barriers for almost all international students studying abroad, but this might be for just the first few months.

During the participants’ stay in Taiwan, they faced the language barrier in part, because Taiwanese people generally do not understand English or do not speak it in their daily lives. “One of the most important aspects of

our behavior is our ability to communicate with others. Furthermore, words and language play a major role in our communication processes. Culture and language share an intimate relationship” (Matsumoto, 1996, pp. 265-266). For example, Jackson described his life and language experiences in Taiwan. He could not watch Taiwan TV shows, could not have deep conversations, and could not join school clubs. He said:

Most of the things are in Chinese. There is nothing in English. I tried to watch TV because I don't know Chinese. I knew very basic conversations in Chinese. ... I have a piano class, [and] I expected to learn stuff; but I went to a class that's all in Chinese. Then the guys are speaking Chinese and writing notes, then playing pianos.

Jackson could not do the things Taiwanese people do. Language was his biggest problem in Taiwan, so he was unable to have deep conversations with other people or join school clubs. Language is a bridge among people; without communication, how could these U.S. students enjoy their lives in Taiwan? “Language literally represents reality [and] ... will reflect people's experience with their surroundings and the ways in which they interact with it. ... Language is a window into another person's life” (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2009, p. 83).

In the author's field observation, she realized that some of the U.S. students are quite good at learning a new language, even Chinese, but it was difficult for some to put themselves into a whole new culture and new language, especially at the beginning when they had just arrived in Taiwan.

One participant, Nancy, had some language difficulties with her host family, which also affected her life in Taiwan:

I've been at home with my host dad. ... It's just like the first couple months. I was, like, what is he talking about? He's, like, pointing to the things, turning the things to me. ... I kind of have to rely on other people [in Taiwan]. ... I'm still not 100% comfortable going out, like, going to sit in the restaurant and reading the menu and taking out the food I want. So it is kind of the difficulties ... just like language. ... I couldn't talk for a long time just by myself.

Nancy is an independent person, so when she felt she needed to rely on other people and could not communicate by herself, she was uncomfortable.

The American stress on the individual as a concrete point of reference begins at a very early age. Americans, like everyone else, recognize that differences in language must be dealt with in cross-cultural situations. But since most Americans speak only one language, they are usually dependent on finding English speakers or translators. (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, pp. 45, 133)

Ben had learned some Chinese before he came to Taiwan. However, once he arrived, he barely recognized Chinese characters or understood his teachers' lectures in class. He said:

When I was in America, I only studied some introductory Chinese, so when I came here, I couldn't recognize a lot of characters. It was hard to understand. I couldn't understand anything, couldn't understand the teacher. But now it is getting better.

Because Ben had a strong motivation to learn new things, he tried to adjust to life in Taiwan. The author found that Jackson, Nancy, and Ben were all aware of the language barrier as their main problem living in Taiwan.

The participants' statements aligned with Cushner et al. (2009): “Language may be the most significant source of cultural learning, because it is through language that most other cultural knowledge is acquired” (p. 83).

In a study of Taiwanese students attending college in the United States, one interviewee said, “The professors used normal speech rate and speed to talk in class. The professors spoke faster; I could not understand the lecture!

I didn't get the points" (Huang, 2009, p. 139). This student's reaction showed that U.S. students studying in Taiwan and Taiwanese students studying in the United States seemed to have the same language problems.

### **Differences in School Life**

The participants noted that Taiwanese learning styles are different from their own, stating that the Taiwanese educational system overemphasized students' grades and test scores. Taiwanese students generally do not raise their own opinions and thoughts, which is different from the U.S. educational system. Jackson described his school life in Taiwan:

On campus you have to meet more people. Usually their English is not very good. It can be frustrating. ... But looking back to American classes, students are asked to do more projects with groups and doing homework and exams.

Jackson also had communication problems with his classmates or group mates. He felt very frustrated and had to adjust to two differences. "Sojourner adjustment in this broader sense—encompassing not only the culture shock and the emotional well-being of the sojourner, but also the attitudinal, academic/professional, and social adjustments and outcomes in the host culture—are reviewed" (Church, 1982, p. 541).

Bryan told me that he adjusted to Taiwanese teaching styles and the new environment very quickly:

Learning Chinese in the beginning is pretty easy, like if you practice the characters, maybe like 15 times, then you begin to memorize these characters very well. Maybe you can't even get how to write it, but probably you can just read it. And also the grammar is pretty straightforward.

Bryan's words showed that finding one's own way to learn a new language and accepting a new culture are the best ways for students from the United States to adjust in a new environment.

Marie thought the Taiwanese teaching style resembled Western style. One difference is Taiwanese students' participation in class. She said Taiwanese students did not ask questions or answer questions individually, which is very different from U.S. students. Marie said she needed to adjust to this difference.

Ms. Lee, a member of the faculty of the Chinese Language Center at Wenzao Foreign Language College, told me, "Most American students are more willing to speak up and really enjoy conversations with people. For example, I ask students questions, and American students answer me individually".

Based on the participants' responses to the author's interview questions, it appears that they all had an outstanding ability to adjust to their school life in Taiwan. In addition, in her field observations, she saw the participants engaging in school activities. Some of them enjoyed their school activities. They joined in students' clubs or activities. Despite racial differences, the author could see they felt comfortable joining in their school life and adjusting to the culture in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, the author also observed that some of the participants still needed to work harder to adapt in a new culture, but the participants all possessed one clear characteristic, that is, knowing how to make the right decisions for themselves and trying harder to live in a different culture:

American society implicitly accepts that children should be encouraged to make decisions for themselves, develop their own opinions, solve their own problems, have their own possessions, and, in general, learn to view the world from the point of view of the self. (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. 133)

### **Adjustment**

Culture as the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, [is] communicated from one generation to the next. ... Communication is important in our everyday lives, but it is also



important for the development, maintenance, and transmission of culture. (Matsumoto, 1996, pp. 17, 265)

Kevin described his experiences with Taiwanese people: "It's different about expressing yourself and how you deal with the social situation, especially with a foreigner. In Taiwan, it's normal that people change collectively, that is as a community; but in America, people change based on individuals".

Kevin realized that Taiwanese people are not good at expressing their feelings but instead hide them unlike people in the United States. By the time, he drew this conclusion he had begun the cultural learning process.

Another participant, Nancy said:

One of the things I know is the people in Taiwan are less direct about things than they are in the United States. How the people act. Like my friend didn't clean her room, and they don't really tell her it's really bothering them. But they talk about it to me and say, "Hey, can you tell her that she needs to do this or give her a hand because it's really bad to us. We are afraid to say anything." Or my host mom writes a note to me and does not say it to my face, which is fine, but it's just different.

Nancy could not understand why Taiwanese people avoided speaking directly face to face when they wanted to communicate; instead they resorted to communicating through other or notes. Nancy wanted direct communication with her host family and everyone else. Ben said, "American people are a lot more straightforward, very direct. Taiwanese people are not very direct". Matsumoto (1996) said, "All areas of our lives are influenced by the culture in which we live" (p. 157). So, the cultural diverseness is our participants' struggle with situations in their lives in Taiwan.

Two interviewees could not adjust to Taiwan traffic, which differed from that in their hometowns. Nancy said that she has never seen so many motorcycles in her life! She was afraid when she walked on the street. Jackson had a similar complaint: "I hate the way people drive here. They are so rude". Two other participants also had difficulty adjusting to Taiwan traffic. Their new environment vastly differed from their hometowns. "Now when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most [of the cues with which they are familiar] are removed" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177).

Living in a foreign country causes feelings of loneliness and homesickness. When the participants initially arrived, these feelings were not really a concern to them, but after few months, they felt homesickness and stress. "The stress produced from cultural adaptation is associated with temporary personality disintegration in the form of emotional uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety" (Kim as cited in Jiali, 2005, p. 154).

For example, Bryan said: "When I first got here I was extremely excited. After a few months I mainly missed my dogs. ... I also miss wide open spaces, seeing vegetation everywhere that grows naturally. That's pretty much what I miss".

Bryan missed his hometown environment and his comfortable bed at home. He struggled with his personal emotions.

Nancy described her homesickness: "I was feeling, like, stressed and sad about missing the holidays in December".

Ben said, "I think [I was most homesick] around November, because many main holidays start then in America".

Most of the participants said they felt homesick during U.S. holidays in Taiwan, because they were unable to celebrate with their family or friends. The winter holidays were the hardest time for them. The author found all participants experienced other emotional times when they missed family, friends, holidays, home, furniture,

and their hometown environment, which were entirely consistent with the research that has shown that homesickness is one of problems to which international students need to adjust (Church, 1982).

### **Approaches to Adjustment, and Coping**

Successful adaptation for international students not only depends on having communication with others, but also on learning and using appropriate behaviors (Lewthwaite, 1996). In other words, international students must do well in order to adjust and cope, and they must know how to function on their own. In this study, the author found three general ways for the student sojourners from the United States to adjust and cope.

**Being independent.** The author found that during the experiences mentioned by the students from the United States, some of them tried to cope on their own when they faced difficulties. These unfamiliar encounters aroused nervousness and confusion, but the U.S. students found a way to adjust. For example, Ben described how he coped when he could not locate the bus stop to return home:

I was kind of nervous, but I got to school and when I came home, I didn't know the name of the bus stop, so I just looked around, but it was ok. I got home. I think in the beginning it was very confusing but I got used to it. And MRT, at first I didn't understand it either, but I went to it by following people a few times, and I realized it's pretty simple actually.

When Ben was in an unfamiliar place in the host country and did not know how to get home, he felt confused but still coped with the difficulties. He tried to adjust by himself and used his own means to fix the problem. U.S. students are expected to learn and think independently (Robinson, 1992).

Jackson said:

It was very different for me, moving away to a big city from my small hometown. I am basically on my own completely there. So, coming over here then and moving around on my own is not a huge change. Because I already been on my own for three years.

Jackson said that because he had already lived in a place different from his home on his own, he knew how to deal with problems.

As for Bryan, he thought that when people are in a new culture, they need to cope:

I think the best thing you can do is try to put yourself in another person's shoes. You need to remember and to tell yourself that there are reasons for cultural differences, and there are factors that have put all these pieces in place.

Bryan's words illustrate that, in general, U.S. students can be independent in dealing with any adjustment and figuring out how to cope with their difficulties.

**Asking for help.** In order to adapt and cope very well, people need friends (Derlega & Janda, 1986). Sometimes, friends can be the best counselor to aid them with troubles they could not otherwise deal with. In this study, the author found that sometimes the students from the United States adjusted to difficulties by asking their close friends for help. For example, Nancy, described her thinking: "I think here in Taiwan I go to my friend who came from America with me because I had the same problem. And then a Taiwanese friend who is closer to me, I can ask that person for help".

Students from the United States discovered approaches to let themselves fit into the host country. They could choose to seek ways to help with adjustment and coping in Taiwan. The social support is the other approach.

**Social network and support.** Some U.S. students used their friends to help search for the answers to problems they encountered in Taiwan. They did not really look for help through the school systems but rather turned to friends, host families, or their biological families to help them accomplish their goals and cope with the

stresses. “Most [people] have a social support network that also includes family members, relatives, neighbors, teachers, and clergy to help us deal with the practical and emotional demands [they] face” (Derlega & Janda, 1986, p. 497). This was true for the participants. For example, one of them said, “I think I have a lot of people I can go to for help here. I think Taiwanese students are best at solving problems in Taiwan”. This participant’s words confirm that families, partners, and friends are the core foundations of emotional and practical support, which help international students’ academic performance and mental health (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Cemalcilar, Falbo, & Stapleton, 2005; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Some studies have shown that effective nonprofessional counselors (naturalistic therapists) are more helpful for giving advice than professional therapists (Derlega & Janda, 1986). They can be more concerned and take greater care of participants than do professional therapists. For example, Bryan pointed out that the best support system was his friends because they knew him very well:

Of course, my support system is primarily my friends because I am close to them and they know more about life here than anyone. They know me, too, they care for me and I care for them, so I think they are my biggest support system.

Bryan did not say the school support systems were not good for him, but he thought they could help him only with school life; for difficulties of adjustment, he found his friends. Some of the participants, however, mentioned that the school support systems were useful in different aspects. For example, Nancy said that the Language Center helped with courses and living problems or offered Chinese tutors, but it was awkward to go there for counseling.

Jackson pointed out that the school support system was not particularly helpful. When he had any problems, he asked an assistant who worked in his department for help: “The office of International Affairs helped us a little bit but mostly just with paperwork. But the one lady in my department, she helped me a lot. She just taught me everything. She is a super helpful office lady”.

### **Discussion and Suggestions**

Research has supported the idea that cultural and social adjustment can affect success in various fields of life, including education. The findings of the current study have provided answers to the author’s research on students from the United States who study in Taiwan, their encounters and problems relevant to cultural adjustment, cultural adaptation, and their ways of coping. The findings also clearly provided significant answers related to my initial research questions:

1. What difficulties or barriers influence U.S. students’ learning in Taiwanese universities?
2. How do U.S. students adjust their intercultural life in Taiwan and cope with their difficulties?
3. What adjustments do U.S. students make and what coping skills do they use to alleviate problems when studying in Taiwan? In what ways do they seek help?

The answers to these questions follow.

#### **Language Barrier**

The language barrier posed a substantial problem, frustrating the participants and leading to a constrained life in Taiwan; furthermore, the participants did not have much opportunity or context to talk to local people or their classmates, so as to thoroughly understand the communication content. The U.S. students lacked socialization with the local public. In addition, important problems appeared to result from language difficulties, homesickness, and adjusting to a new educational system and to social customs and norms (Church, 1982). Thus,

to help decrease language obstacles and understand a foreign language (Chinese, in this case), the students from the United States needed to take more Chinese language courses and actively participate in social activities to make friends with Taiwanese.

### **Cultural Adjustment**

The greater the perceived cultural difference between the home culture and the host culture, the more difficult it becomes to adjust (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). The participants of this study had left their hometowns and had to deal with the considerable cultural differences between the United States and Taiwan. Initially, U.S. students experienced difficulties adapting to the new environment; however, they took their time to adapt to Taiwanese culture and its customs, which presented the greatest differences between the United States and Taiwan. Adjustment in terms of learning principles implies procedure for reducing maladjustment; for instance, transfer of home culture reinforcers, development of new reinforcers that are compatible with the new culture, modeling of successful sojourners, and vicarious reinforcement (Church, 1982, p. 543). To adjust to a new cultural environment depends on one's own cultural adjustment ability, which impacts adjustment to a new culture and changes in thoughts, behavior, and psychological feelings.

### **Ways to Adjust and Cope**

Successful adaptation of international students to new things not only depends on communicating with others, but also on learning and using appropriate behaviors (Lewthwaite, 1996). In this study, the adaptation and integration processes of most of the U.S. students were the same as indicated by previous research on international students studying abroad. They seemed to experience situations similar to those of other international students. However, they had their own way to adjust and cope with their new environment. Perhaps the U.S. students in this study suffered from frustration and difficulties, but they sought appropriate ways to deal with these issues and cope by themselves. "The reality is that a substantial majority of people will attempt to solve their problems on their own—and the efforts of many of them will meet with success" (Derlega & Janda, 1986, p. 478).

### **Support Systems**

Support systems for foreign students are crucial. "Most of us have a social support network that also includes family members, relatives, neighbors, teachers, and clergy to help us deal with the practical and emotional demands we face" (Derlega & Janda, 1986, p. 497). In this study, the U.S. students did not seek help only from the school system. They also preferred seeking other resources such as their close friends and tutors. In fact, "having friends is important to our psychological well-being. They can help us accomplish our goal and cope with the stresses of life, and they can be a vehicle for personal growth" (Derlega & Janda, 1986, p. 497). Based on previous research, the author pondered friends as the best counselors to help international students with problems or troubles when they could not solve them alone. Overall, the students from the United States found approaches to help fit in and chose various ways to ask for help in adjustment and coping.

Cross-cultural counseling aims at dealing with sojourner adjustment problems (Church, 1982). International students from other cultures use psychological services, because of their tendency to experience psychological difficulties in physical terms during emotional problems. This theory is related to the participants who may feel optimal adjustment in the host culture will be assisted by the adoption of certain host behaviors and norms, thus solving their personal and psychological issues. Nevertheless, some of the participants tended to use other resources and aids, including tutors, the administrative staff, or friends of the same nationality. International students typically seek people they are close to in order to obtain a better approach, which is true for the

participants. Overall, counseling arrangements for adjustment are important for foreign students, and such assistance is a helpful support system.

This study provided some insights and suggestions, which follow.

### **For International Students**

International students must make some necessary changes in their daily lives when living abroad, which help them decrease miscommunication among people and improve their cross-cultural perspective and experience. The author also recommends that before they depart to a new country, such as Taiwan, the international students should take an examination for Chinese level placement, so that they can make sure that they are qualified to speak and read basic Chinese well.

The Taiwanese government has offered many types of scholarships, attracting international students to Taiwan. However, the author realize that Taiwan is not well-known to international students. Therefore, information and resources about Taiwanese scholarships constitute the next concern, which would provide guidance to educational institutions around the world.

### **For Host University Support Systems**

Support systems for foreign students are essential. Social support contributes to international students' cross-cultural adjustment, which plays an arbitrating role between loneliness and adjustment difficulties (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). The sources of social support are crucially important to international students in adjustment to a university outside their home country (Chavajay, 2013; Chen, Mallinckrodt, & Mobley, 2002).

Some of the participants in this study mentioned that the school support systems were not particularly helpful. The author suggests the institutions provide opportunities to interact with international students and their host families. Orientation sessions and appropriate social activities would be helpful. In addition, the international student affairs offices should hold orientations to help international students arrange class schedules and offer basic programs to help anticipate special areas of need at the individual level. Researchers have suggested that intervention programs that support intercultural contact are valuable for international students (Nesdale & Todd, 2000), making the services noted above particularly crucial.

In addition, counseling depends on a student's Chinese language ability, so it is important to provide bilingual language assistance and services to help them understand relevant information. Providing comprehensive counseling is an important consideration, because it represents responsible service to foreign students seeking assistance and problem-solving possibilities. In addition, personnel at the host university should care about international students and do more for them, and not simply wait for them to ask for help. For example, schools can help those students more by introducing them to other international students or making absolutely sure that all international students have the information they need; otherwise, they may be without help in Taiwan and become frustrated.

### **For Host Families**

According to the participants some host families were kind and hospitable, but some were not. Therefore, universities should find quality host families and hold orientations with them or design programs, particularly those related to cross-culture agendas, in order to train those who want to join this international venture and do well. Establishing good relationships with international students is a serious issue; after all, these host families represent Taiwan in the international exchange.

## Conclusions

“Adjustment involves coping with such stresses and obstacles as they occur; adjustment is a continuous process” (Derlega & Janda, 1986, p. 4). It involves five determinants of culture: geographic surroundings, climate and resources, human achievements in the cultural environment and cultural change (DiCaprio, 1980). Culture also comprises objective and subjective elements. The objective elements include the language spoken, clothing, and cuisine among other factors; the subjective components of culture include attitudes people hold, behavioral norms, and manners. These factors are relative to whether all people describe them in a similar manner and whether commonly perceived cultural differences are considered (Cushner et al., 2009). The results of this study indicated the importance of cross-cultural adjustment for international students.

The author’s literature review showed that adjustment involves factors students face when they study abroad (Church, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Thus, she looked at the adjustment processes of U.S. students as they met a variety of situations, for instance, the strangeness of Taiwanese banknotes, habits, transportation, and active greetings to foreigners. Another factor was loneliness and homesickness as well as personal problems, such as psychological issues. Homesickness was a common problem for the all participants, especially when holidays were celebrated at home.

Several studies have shown the difficulties that newcomers often experience like intestinal disturbances, but the environment does not change as a result; they must adapt themselves to the environment until the problems no longer affect them. In addition, concerning getting along under new living conditions in general, one important point worth considering is attitude (Oberg, 1960; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). In this study, the adaptation process of all participants was the same as in previous research. In other words, the U.S. students might have suffered frustration and difficulty, but they created their own ways to adjust.

Thus, the students had to adapt to this reality and cope with feeling embarrassed. Moreover, the U.S. students may have hoped host families would treat them like an extension of the family rather than as a novelty, babysitter, or English tutor. This because “Social learning approaches acknowledge the importance of interpersonal relationships but specify that [being] friends with hosts [is] crucial for learning the skills of a new culture” (Searle & Ward, 1990, pp. 451-452).

Greater sociocultural adjustment in sojourners was related to being more extraverted, and “men seemed to show more sociocultural adjustment than did women” (Swagler & Jome, 2005, pp. 532-533). People who grow up in a cultural circumstance and then must function in a different culture can find their very identity challenged (Anderson, 1994); people who have difficulty coping with the psychological and sociocultural tension of the cross-cultural situation may also become frustrated (Shaffer & Shoben, 1956).

Students from the United States have diverse views of friendship; in fact, several in this study particularly enjoyed meeting local people (Taiwanese friends or classmates) and made many new friends. These students could ask their Taiwanese friends about language problems and obtain help learning Chinese. Other students chose not to form close friendships; nevertheless, having good friendships with local students or people is a way of acquiring support.

Certainly, some empirical evidence suggests that individuals differ in their ability to adjust both psychologically and socio-culturally in cross-cultural situations (Church, 1982; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001); moreover, personality may affect the achievement of cross-cultural adjustment and coping. Adjustment difficulties for foreign students emanate from individual differences in coping and in stressor reactivity (Church,

1982). Why some international students fail to adjust cannot be determined because factors might vary from country to country and person to person; therefore, adjusting to cross-cultural living or studying in a foreign country may be tied to personality.

### Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by population size, which was just six people; furthermore, the findings cannot be generalized because sources of data collection came from qualitative methods. Readers may not be able to make extensive inferences about all students from the United States studying in Taiwan. In addition, the collection of data depended more or less on participants who were willing or chose to share their experiences and stories. This limitation in the in-depth interviews might have influenced the whole of this study. The current study lacked a gender and personality analysis component, so no data were available about how the variables of gender and personality may have influenced the cross-cultural adjustment process and means of coping. Despite these restrictions, however, the study may provide potential agendas for future researchers to explore problems that international students encounter in cross-cultural adjustment, coping, and cultural learning experiences, including gender and personality in various universities in Taiwan, which was also the goal of this study. To sum up, the author hopes to have shed light on international students' cross-cultural adjustment and cultural learning experience in Taiwanese higher education in order to enhance opportunities for cross-cultural research in the future.

### References

- Anderson, L. E. (1994). A new look at an old construct: Cross-cultural adaptation. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 18(3), 293-328.
- Baba, Y., & Hosoda, M. (2014). Home away home: Better understanding of the role of social support in predicting cross-cultural adjustment among international students. *College Student Journal*, 48(1), 1-15.
- Baptiste, I. (2001). Qualitative data analysis: Common phrases, strategic differences. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(3), Article 22. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-2.3.917>
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Harlow: Pearson.
- Calhoun, J. F., & Acocella, J. R. (1990). *Psychology of adjustment and human relationships* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Cemalcilar, Z., Falbo, T., & Stapleton, L. M. (2005). Cyber communication: A new opportunity for international students' adaptation? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(1), 91-110. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.04.002>
- Chang, P. (2011). *How Taiwanese universities are internationalizing the student body*. Retrieved from <http://www.qsworldclass.com/showcase/countryfeature12.php>
- Chavajay, P. (2013). Perceived social support among international students at a U.S. university. *Psychological Reports*, 112(2), 667-677.
- Chen, H., Mallinckrodt, B., & Mobley, M. (2002). Attachment patterns of East Asian international students and sources of perceived social support as moderators of the impact of U.S. racism and cultural distress. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 9(1-2), 27-48.
- Chen, Y. G. (2023). 359 Honduran students are in Taiwan, and more than 100 have received Taiwan scholarships. *Central News Agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2162037>
- Cheng, S. M. (2002). *Social science of qualitative research*. Taipei. Wu Nan Press.
- Church, Y. L. (1982). Sojourner adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 91(3), 540-572. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.91.3.540>
- Constantine, M. G., Okazaki, K., & Utsey, S. O. (2004). Self-concealment, social efficacy, acculturative stress and depression in African, Asian and Latin America international college students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 74(3), 230-241.
- Cushner, K. H., McClelland, A., & Safford, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Human diversity in education: An integrative approach* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Derlega, V. J., & Janda, L. H. (1986). *Personal adjustment: The psychology of everyday life*. Upper Saddle River: Scott Foresman.
- DiCaprio, N. S. (1980). *Adjustment: Fulfilling human potentials*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall College Division.
- Frankel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2003). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1982). Social difficulty in a foreign culture: An empirical analysis of culture shock. In S. Bochner (Ed.), *Cultures in contact: Studies in cross-cultural interactions* (pp. 161-198). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8, 597-607. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1870>
- Hall, E. T. (1973). *The silent language*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. London: Sage.
- Huang, Y. W. (2009). Listening to their voices: An in-depth study of language anxiety and cultural adjustment among Taiwanese graduate students in the United States (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania).
- Huntley, H. S. (1993). Adult international students: Problems of adjustment (Unpublished paper, Ohio University).
- Jiali, M. A. (2005). Acculturative stress and use of the internet among East Asian international students in the United States. *Cyber Psychology and Behavior*, 8(2), 154-161. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2005.8.154>
- Kim, Y. Y. (1988). *Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: An integrative theory*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1981). The stress and coping paradigm. In C. Eisdorfer, D. Cohen, A. Kleinman, and P. Maxim (Eds.), *Models for clinical psychopathology* (pp. 177-214). Rochester: Spectrum.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1993). From psychological stress to the emotions: A history of changing outlooks. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44(1), 1-21. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.44.020193.000245>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1991). The concept of coping. In A. Monat and R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and coping: An anthology* (3rd ed.) (pp. 189-206). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lewthwaite, M. (1996). A study of international students' perspectives on cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 19, 167-185.
- Ma, Y.-C. (2011). Taiwan will become a higher education hub: President Ma. *China Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2011/01/12/287319/Taiwan-will.htm>
- Mallinckrodt, B., & Leong, F. T. L. (1992). International graduate students, stress, and social support. *Journal of College Student Development*, 33(1), 71-78.
- Matsumoto, D. (1996). *Culture and psychology*. Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137-145.
- Nesdale, D., & Todd, P. (2000). Effect of contact on intercultural acceptance: A field study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24, 341-360. Retrieved from [https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/S0147-1767\(00\)00005-5](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/S0147-1767(00)00005-5)
- Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405>
- Pitts, M. J. (2009). Identity and the role of expectation, stress, and talk in short-term student sojourner adjustment: An application of the integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(6), 450-462. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.07.002>
- Redmond, M. V., & Bunyi, J. M. (1993). The relationship of intercultural communication competence with stress and the handling of stress as reported by international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 17(2), 235-254. Retrieved from [https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/0147-1767\(93\)90027-6](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/0147-1767(93)90027-6)
- Robinson, J. (1992). International students and American university culture: Adjustment issues. Paper presented at the *Washington Area Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (WATESOL) Annual Convention*. Arlington, VA.
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(4), 449-464. Retrieved from [https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/0147-1767\(90\)90030-Z](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/0147-1767(90)90030-Z)
- Shaffer, L. F., & Shoben, E. J., Jr. (1956). *The psychology of adjustment*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stewart, E. C., & Bennett, M. J. (1991). *American cultural patterns: A cross-cultural perspective* (Rev. ed.). Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.
- Süner, S. (2009). International students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation in the United States (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.57709/1061378>



- Swagler, M. A., & Jome, L. M. (2005). The effects of personality and acculturation on the adjustment of North American sojourners in Taiwan. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(4), 527-536. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-0167.52.4.527>
- Sykes, I. J., & Eden, D. (1987). Transitional stress, social support and psychological strain. *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 6(4), 293-298.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1993). Where's the "culture" in cross-cultural transition?: Comparative studies in sojourner adjustment. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 24(2), 221-249. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0022022193242006>
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (2001). Coping with cross-cultural transition. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32, 636-642. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0022022101032005007>
- Westwood, M. J., & Barker, M. (1990). Academic achievement and social adaptation among international students: A comparison groups study of the peer-pairing program. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(2), 251-263. Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(90\)90008-K](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(90)90008-K)
- Yeh, T. M. (1999). *Regulations and theoretical basis of Chinese teaching*. Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University Press.
- Ying, Y. W. (2005). Variation in acculturative stressors over time: A study of Taiwanese students in the United States. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(1), 59-71. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.04.003>
- Young, J. H. (2009). *Research on cross-cultural adaptation issues of international students in China*. Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.